



## **Stella Biddison Werner** **(1900-1981)**

***First woman President of the Montgomery County Council. First woman in Maryland to be named President of a county government body***

Stella Biddison Werner was born in Baltimore in 1901. Her father was a Maryland state senator and her great-grandfather served in the Maryland state legislature. She attended Easter High School while taking jobs as a playground supervisor and at the Baltimore Sun. After graduating from Goucher College in Baltimore in 1922, she worked as personnel manager for Hutzler Brothers Department Store also in Baltimore. In 1925, she married John H. Werner, a mechanical engineer, and moved to Montgomery County in 1928.

Werner became involved in community groups in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase area. In 1934, she organized the Women's Democratic Club of Leland. In 1936 she served as president of the Bethesda Elementary PTA.

In 1938, Werner served on the steering committee to establish the Bethesda Public Library. At the same time, she was chair of the committee formed to open the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Recreation Center. During World War II, Werner served on the operating committee of the Bethesda USO and also helped organize the Montgomery County YMCA.

From 1942 to 1947, Werner worked vigorously as Executive Director of the Montgomery County Charter Committee promoting the home rule movement and leading the fight for council manager form of government for the county. The 1948 charter established the council manager government and abolished the old order of county government run by commissioners. In 1950, Werner, a Democrat, was elected to the new council she helped to create. In 1952, Werner became the first woman in Maryland to win a Democratic primary election for congressional office. However, she lost the Sixth District race in the general election.

Werner was reelected in 1954 and 1958 to the Montgomery County Council. While on the Council, she was a member of the Executive Committee of the Maryland State Association of County Commissioners and Chair of the Internal Operations Committee of the Washington Metropolitan Council of Governments. She also was Vice Chair of urban counties in the National Association of County Officials. She fought for laws prohibiting conflicts in county planning and zoning operations. She was credited as being a major force behind passage of the county's 1962 ordinance prohibiting racial segregation in public accommodations.

In 1959, Werner was chosen President of the Council, making her the first woman to hold that position. Despite her success, she felt that politics at the governmental level was dominated by men. "Women work mostly at the precinct level," Werner declared to a local newspaper. "This should be changed. There

are many, many competent women who have the time to study, attend meetings and devote full time to governmental activities." In 1962, she made her fourth bid for a seat on the council but was defeated. After that, she did not hold public office. "I think it was the defeat and my age and the fact that my home meant so much to me," Werner confided to a local newspaper in 1980. "I just wanted to get a lot more out of life than I had been getting. Politics takes your life over completely. I felt that I had given enough."

In addition to public office, Werner was an active member of the community and the Methodist Church. For five years she had an interview program, "Club Time with Stella Werner," on a local radio station, and a weekly column, "Listening," about local government on the Bethesda Record. A longtime member of the Bethesda United Methodist Church and of the Damascus United Methodist Church, Werner continued teaching Sunday school, a task that she executed for 34 years. She was the first president of the Women's Society of Christian Service of the Bethesda Methodist Church. Later, she became an honorary member. She also was an honorary member of the Silver Spring Business and Professional Women's Club. Werner received the Good Citizenship Awards from the Bethesda Chevy Chase Chamber of Commerce and the Junior Chamber of Commerce.

Werner's strong commitment and long service to the community can be summarized in her own words. "I was born into the Methodist church and grew up as an activist, always reaching out and getting involved to improve conditions around me," she told a reporter one year before her death. Werner died of cancer at the age of 79 in 1981. The County Council Office building in downtown Rockville is named the Stella B. Werner Council Office Building in her honor.

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#### **SOURCES:**

- Montgomery County Archives
- The Montgomery County Historical Society Library
- Peerless Rockville
- Montgomery County, Maryland. Our History and Government. Rockville, Maryland: Montgomery County Government (1999)